



## Battling Burnout

Stan Bunce, PhD, ABPP

**D**o you still care about your clients as you once did? Are you convinced that many of them do not want to recover? Do you frequently feel detached, bored, unsupported or unappreciated? These questions represent signs of professional burnout, a common condition among those in the helping professions. Why, and what can you do about it? So wonders Dr. Michael Weiderman, an associate professor of psychology at Columbia College in South Carolina, who speculates that burnout is primarily attributed to mental health professionals' ultimate lack of control over client outcomes. Some may view their client's lack of success as an indication that they, the professionals, lack the qualities necessary to be effective helpers. Others may protect their sense of competency by blaming clients. He suggests these seven steps to burnout

recovery and prevention:

1. Distinguish between **responsible for** and **responsible to**. To be responsible to clients means to be the best psychotherapist we can be. To be responsible for clients implies responsibility for their decisions and actions.
2. Reward yourself for jobs well done. Most therapists need recognition and support from those who are close to them. Professional and personal appreciation should be a regular part of our practice.
3. Develop a greater awareness of the attributions we make toward client outcomes. Limiting our judgments leaves room for becoming more compassionate. Try to assume that others want to be happy, and they currently are doing their best to achieve happiness.
4. Take notice of the positive rather than the negative. Most client contact centers around the negatives in their lives, and our clinical expertise often begins with psychopathology.
5. Temper the tendency to focus on the past or the future rather than on the present. We learn from the past (to be critical), and to prepare for the future (worry what may but often does not happen), but we live in the present.
6. Build your social support. Our relationships with clients are primarily one-way, that is, primarily for their benefit. Professional boundaries and ethical principles prevent our clients from getting to know us very well. Our connection with coworkers and colleagues is vital — active listening and encouragement help us prevent burnout more than simply agreeing on the negatives things about our work.
7. Achieve job satisfaction and a sense of personal control over your work by becoming more involved and challenged. Nicholas Lore shares his suggestions for increasing job satisfaction in *Living a Life You Love*.

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- Your work fully expresses all aspects of your nature. It fits your innate talents perfectly. It expresses your temperament and personality fully — even those parts you do not see as positive. It provides the rewards that matter to you. It fulfills your goals. It occurs in an environment that is suitable and appropriate to who you are.
- The subject of your work is something in which you have a passionate and abiding interest. It is deeply meaningful to you. It continues to appeal to you as the years roll by.
- Your work continually nourishes you. It provides a natural route for your evolution. Its challenges stretch you to continue to learn and grow.
- It does no harm to anyone. It is ecologically sound. It does not oppose appropriate stewardship of the earth.
- It serves humanity in some way. You and I cannot judge what is appropriate service for another person. In the larger scheme of things, an IRS agent is just as important a part of the fabric of humanity, as is a teacher, a mother, an entrepreneur.
- It is freely accepted. You work because you choose to, not because you are compelled to.
- You are “being” yourself.

What are you willing to do to make work a meaningful and vital part of your life?

#### References

Lore, Nicholas (1998). *The Pathfinder: How to Choose or Change your Career for a Lifetime of Satisfaction and Success*, New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Wiederman, Michael (2005). *Battling Burnout*, Mindful Publications, LLC Paradigm Magazine 

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